RESEARCH MATTERS
MORE THAN EVER
FOR CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE
The imperative of investing in research for children in an uncertain, fragile world

In a world that is more complex, challenging, and rapidly changing than ever, evidence is an increasingly vital commodity to guide actions for children and young people. The COVID-19 crisis has underscored this: the value of research as a tool for understanding, action, and change has perhaps never been higher as we desperately seek lasting ways to protect citizens.

COVID-19 has awoken us to the uncertainty that underlies our common future and the fragility of much of the progress attained in recent decades. But for millions of children, such uncertainties and fragilities were already part of their everyday lives, even before the pandemic.

"Evidence is an increasingly vital commodity to guide actions for our children and young people."

These are the children that already lack essential vaccines against infectious diseases. The children who suffer from malnutrition and food poverty. Whose family livelihoods are insecure and often lacking a social safety net. The children—and especially girls—who remain out of education, and those who struggle to learn even when they attend school.

The millions of young women who are married and become mothers while still children themselves. The children whose lives are often marked by violence, abuse, or exploitation. And those with mental health distress, uncertain future prospects, or who are deeply concerned about the other global existentialist threat – climate change.

For these and other children and young people, answers are needed to the societal, developmental, and environmental challenges that affect their present and threaten their future. Their generation and their successors will bear the brunt of the maelstrom of risks and liabilities that are rapidly accumulating amid growing inequality, injustice, fear, and debt. We urgently need to provide enhanced evidence for decision and policy making to help catalyse progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during this decade.

Many of these answers can only be found by applying research and evidence to pressing questions and translating findings into policies, programmes, and practices that can transform children’s lives.

This Background Document highlights the central role of research and evidence generation in UNICEF’s work at all levels. Its purpose is to give Board Members a keen sense of how research has evolved at UNICEF; an insight into the increasingly central role of UNICEF Innocenti—the organisation’s dedicated research office—in defining and supporting research throughout the organization; and the key steps needed to strengthen the research culture throughout UNICEF to meet the current and future challenges for children and young people.

UNICEF’s long and distinguished legacy of research for children

UNICEF has a productive research legacy stretching back to its earliest years and which informs its actions on the ground. UNICEF research has heavily influenced its programming strategies and public policy advice for children from the 1960s to the present day, often leading to transformative programming and action that still reverberates today, as the infographic below illustrates.
Evidence and Impact

Cutting-edge research supported by UNICEF led to major breakthroughs in programming, policies and practices for children.

1960s
Survey on needs of children of the developing world conducted, based on research reports from fellow UN agencies. Resulted in new 'Whole Child' approach to UNICEF programming, expanding activities beyond health to embrace education, social welfare and other aspects of children's lives.

1970s
Research on education, healthcare and nutrition were commissioned by UNICEF. Evidence led to groundbreaking 'Basic Services' approach, which identified key services for children and set the foundation for UNICEF's community-based programming focus.

1980s
The Impact of World Recession on Children and Adjustment with a Human Face studies demonstrated the perils of austerity for children. International financial institutions invested in health and education for crisis-hit countries as a result. Key studies on selective primary healthcare and cost effective interventions were leveraged by UNICEF to reformulate its health care programmes. The 'Child Survival Revolution' has saved millions of children's lives over the subsequent decades.

1990s
UNICEF Innocenti led extensive research on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As a result, the CRC was enshrined in many national and international laws and policies. Flagship Report Card series on child well-being in rich countries launched. As a result, high-income countries are held accountable for the well-being of their children, with league tables often prompting major changes in policy. MONEE Project and Social Monitor for Children in transition economies launched. The studies led to better understanding of and investment in children in transition economies.

2000s
Narrowing the Gaps study on the merits of focusing on the poorest and most marginalized children. Essential services expanded to the poorest and most vulnerable thus contributing to diminishing equity gaps.

2010s
The Transfer Project launched to assess the impact of child-focused social protection. As a result social protection practices have been expanded and enhanced in low- and middle-income countries in Africa and Asia.
UNICEF’s wide-ranging research often focuses on practical action, reflecting the numerous inter-connected aspects of children’s lives. Long before Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, our research addressed issues of importance to children and child rights, treating them as universal, indivisible, and indispensable for poverty reduction, equity, and equality, as well as economic growth. The studies in the infographic are far from exhaustive.

Evidence has become increasingly important to how we as an organisation make change for children. It is singled out as a key change strategy for achieving the goals of UNICEF’s 2018-2021 Strategic Plan.1 Evidence needs, covering both data and research, for each of the Plan’s five goals are outlined in a companion document2, and have informed many of UNICEF Innocenti’s research priorities.

Research is essential for UNICEF to adjust and evolve its programmes, influence policy and delivery, and advocate for children.

The ethically generated quality research by UNICEF Innocenti and other parts of the organisation is essential for us to adjust and evolve programmes, influence policy and effective service delivery, innovate and advocate for all children. This is particularly important to support UNICEF’s mandate of focusing on the children in greatest need and is pertinent in all country contexts—high, middle, and low income.

UNICEF’s research findings have multiple other uses beyond their influence on policies and programmatic action. They contribute to influencing discourse and debate that often result in changes for children further down the line. They support capacity building by informing guidance and training materials. They have academic impact through their publication in prestigious journals, presentation at symposia worldwide, and contribution to the global scientific evidence base. Not least, they reflect collective efforts through co-creation and co-publication with other UN agencies and partners, thus helping drive joint delivery on the SDGs through a reformed UN system.

UNICEF Innocenti: a dedicated Office of Research on children and young people

UNICEF Innocenti is becoming increasingly central to driving forward the organisation’s research agenda. The office was set up in 1986 with the support of the Government of Italy for ‘study, research, information, and education in the field of assistance to children.’ With the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, UNICEF Innocenti focused on supporting its interpretation and application in national jurisdictions through research and advocacy.

The ensuing decades saw UNICEF Innocenti widen its role in ground breaking research, such as the impact of structural adjustments and austerity measures on children in the 1980s; the transition from communism to capitalism in Eastern Europe in the 1990s; and the global financial crisis of the late 2000s.

In 2010, the centre merged with the UNICEF Office of Research and has since then taken the leading role in supporting key research priorities for the organisation, in collaboration with UNICEF regional, country, and headquarter offices, including the National Committees.

UNICEF Innocenti’s triple mandate of research generation, research facilitation, and convening

Reflecting UNICEF’s wide-ranging work and the evolving needs of children, UNICEF Innocenti has a triple mandate: research generation; research facilitation, capacity building and knowledge exchange; and convening expertise.

First, in keeping with its original focus of evidence generation, the office undertakes cutting edge strategic research on key issues for children and young people. It also addresses research questions set in collaboration with
country and regional offices, and other external partners. UNICEF Innocenti publishes regularly in peer reviewed journals to ensure its methodologies are of the highest standards to inform policy and programmes, helping to establish UNICEF as a global thought leader on evidence for children and young people.

UNICEF Innocenti’s established research workstream focus on the impact of social protection programmes on child wellbeing, including on adolescents; gender equality; child-friendly family policies; children in the digital age; child poverty and equity; violence against children and women; children migrating alone or with families; child labour and exploitation; and factors behind learning outcomes, including teacher absenteeism and system factors. 

UNICEF Innocenti’s forward-looking research focuses on issues that have an increased bearing on future trajectories for a safe and secure childhood and adolescence.

UNICEF Innocenti’s forward-looking research aims to be adaptive and focus on issues that have an increased bearing on future trajectories for a safe and secure childhood and adolescence. These themes include: youth mental health and wellbeing; young people’s participation; climate change; and the impact of COVID-19 and health crises on children’s rights, protection and development, especially those most vulnerable and those at risk of being left behind.

Investigating the impact of these emerging and unpredictable areas on children is critical as they are likely to form part of UNICEF’s future programmes, helping it support governments to set priorities and making UNICEF a partner of choice to plan for future generations.

Second, UNICEF Innocenti also actively collaborates with and supports other parts of the organisation in their research generation through the development and application of a broad array of research methodologies and standards, supporting the commissioning of quality and ethical research, and training UNICEF staff in robust research management processes and research methods.

Innovative research methods used at UNICEF Innocenti include: evidence synthesis products (such as evidence and gap maps); rapid evidence assessments and systematic evidence reviews; applied research; surveys; impact evaluations; and longitudinal studies. The office publishes an array of research products and tailored to diverse audiences, from large scale reports, such as the biennial Report Card on child well-being, to succinct research briefs. A keen focus of the office is to make research accessible, particularly to governments and non-academic audiences.

Thirdly, the office convenes experts, practitioners, policymakers, youth leaders, and other vital partners to discuss the latest evidence, identify evidence gaps and ways to fill them, share good practices, and set research and policy agendas for the future. In 2019, the office launched an annual thought leadership event, Leading Minds for Children and Young People. With the support of the Office of the Executive Director and with the Government of Italy and the World Health Organization as co-hosts, the first global convening was focused on the silent mental health crisis that needs urgent attention. These convenings have continued online in 2020 to spotlight opportunities and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic for children’s well-being and futures.
Best of UNICEF Research
A Selection of Impactful UNICEF Research from 2013-2019

**The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Systematic Review**
- The study of the CRC’s legal implementation in 12 countries used by the UK government to incorporate the CRC into domestic law.
- Led to the establishment of the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for the island of Jersey.
- Had spillover effects, including being used by UNICEF in advocacy with other governments.
- Is now a living project with Queens University Belfast, which continues the research.

**Fecal contamination of drinking water in low- and middle-income countries**
- The systematic review led to new indicators to monitor drinking water quality.
- Informed a new approach to assess drinking water quality in national surveys around the world.
- Evidence used in a UNICEF innovation challenge to develop a simple test to rapidly detect fecal contamination in water samples, greatly simplifying complex and time-consuming water quality testing methods.

**Social Cash Transfer Pilot Programme, Ethiopia**
- Informed the design of Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) to support food-insecure households.
- Secured additional funding for follow-up research and implementation.
- Fostered better collaboration between UNICEF Ethiopia and partners in the Tigray region as well as intra-governmental collaboration on the PSNP.

**Emergency preparedness in Chad, Madagascar, and Pakistan**
- Stimulated UNICEF’s First Action to allocate humanitarian funding towards high-risk contexts for emergency preparedness, with allocations given to Haiti, the State of Palestine, and the Pacific Islands.
- Contributed to the Grand Bargain discussions at the World Humanitarian Summit 2018.
- Strengthened UN inter-agency cooperation in emergency preparedness and humanitarian response.

**Reducing preventable child deaths in Mongolia**
- Demonstrated potential of communication, health education, and mobile health to reduce child deaths from pneumonia, diarrhea, and newborn complication, with roles for the private sector.
- Influenced a public expenditure review on measures to reduce the negative impact of air pollution on child health.
- Motivated the Ministry of Health and WHO to commission further research into the availability, affordability, and quality of medicines.
- A collaboration between UNICEF and the National Centre for Maternal and Child Health launched new guidance materials.
- Fed into a review of the national midwifery curriculum.

**Every child counts: Understanding the needs and perspectives of children with disabilities**
- Influenced Palestine’s Ministry of Social Development to review the Palestinian Disability Law and practices around its implementation.
- Mobilised additional investment to improve neonatal care and hospital services, strengthen the capacity of early childhood development professionals, and build disability-friendly water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities in health centres.
Building a research culture in UNICEF and strengthening its integration into programmes

Less than ten years remain to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Even before the COVID crisis, analysis showed that the world was failing to achieve targets on key areas of child survival and development, including child poverty, violence against children and women, learning poverty, mental health, immunisation, and hygiene. Child poverty was even increasing in some of the world’s richest countries. Innovative breakthroughs are needed to change this, with research and evidence leading the way.

The deep and lingering impact of COVID-19 means that ‘business as usual’ strategies and programmes for children will leave us far short of achieving the SDGs. The world urgently requires new and better solutions that are evidence informed. Given the myriad challenges that the world’s 2.3 billion children and young people face, it is critical that UNICEF builds a stronger research and evidence culture throughout the organisation to help shape its advocacy, programming, and operations.

6 actions to build a research culture in UNICEF

1. More predictable funding for core staff and activities, such as leading priority research workstreams, flagship products, research facilitation, and capacity strengthening and convening.

The Government of Italy has hosted and supported UNICEF Innocenti’s research and vision with generous, stable, and flexible funding, guidance, and institutional backing for more than 30 years. Replenishment funding has enabled UNICEF Innocenti to investigate cutting-edge topics pertinent to children’s lives and futures, and to evolve to reflect the changing world. Consideration might be given by other Member States to such financing, either for specific themes or for the office as whole. Options for increasing predictable funding will be discussed as part of the next Strategic Plan.

Best of UNICEF Research: Capturing the best research practices and projects

A key role of UNICEF Innocenti is to capture and share the best of the vast array of research activities conducted by the organisation’s country and regional offices, and HQ divisions. For the past seven years the office has established and managed the Best of UNICEF Research, an annual exercise which looks at a diverse selection of the organisation’s research and identifies the best projects being undertaken by UNICEF offices, both to recognise excellence, but also to identify lessons and promising practices that could be taken to scale or adopted by other parts of UNICEF and beyond.

Many of the Best of UNICEF Research finalists have been successful in supporting governments and other partners to make vital changes in policy, practice, programmes, and behaviours. Some examples of this are showcased in the infographic on the previous page. The impact of these research initiatives is visible thanks to this yearly exercise that evaluates and celebrates important, ethical, and innovative research for children around the world. For the first time, this year the remit of the exercise has been expanded to cover both research and evaluation under the banner of the Best of UNICEF Research and Evaluation.
Expansion of research capacity building to staff and partners at the field level. With UNICEF spending millions on research each year, it is vital that these funds are deployed to gain the best value possible. Oversight and capacity building will be critical to this and can be achieved through regionalisation of research capacity and increased technical support to country and regional offices, as well as enhancing the facilitation and standard settings role of UNICEF Innocenti.

Setting of a finite set of clear, urgent, and adequately funded corporate research priorities that can realistically be achieved within the next Strategic Plan. These research priorities will be formulated to investigate the most pressing questions for children to help achieve the Plan and to respond to risk events that arise within the Plan’s tenure.

As emphasised by the Executive Director during the last Executive Board, there is an urgent need to build stronger, more resilient systems. This requires increasing demand-driven research, integrated within programmes and co-designed with governments and others from the onset. UNICEF Innocenti is enhancing its capacity to scale and implement research to address the long-standing gaps between policies and concrete service delivery for children.

While continuing to meet the requisite standards of quality and ethics, research must adapt to the fast-paced world of the COVID-19 era. In this regard UNICEF has moved swiftly, setting up research support structures to investigate both the epidemiological and social impacts of the pandemic on children and adolescents, including on new issues such as mental health, the participation of young people, and behavioural science and insights. The crisis also necessitates the production and distillation of UNICEF research at a rapid pace through strategic investments, quicker turnaround times for synthesis and surveillance, use of innovative research methodologies, and compelling print, multimedia, and social media products.

Substantial and solid partnerships are essential for the generation, facilitation, and use of relevant research. Collaboration is also important to leverage our partners’ assets and to synthesise evidence from diverse sources. Country and regional offices and National Committees routinely partner with local and international institutions to undertake research, and increasingly seek to use local research capacity and priority-setting.

More innovative arrangements will be required in the future, including co-creation and coordination, cross-fertilization, and coherence with other evidence functions within UNICEF, with other UN agencies, and with a broad range of foundations, government, and civil society partners. A key and ongoing challenge is undertaking research for children and young people with children and young people. UNICEF will pursue this challenge.

Three decades of evidence generation efforts have proven that research is not a luxury but necessary to ensure effective targeting of resources and achievement of results. It is time for us all, both UNICEF and its Executive Board, to recognise that navigating the increasingly complex world of the 2020’s will require more and better knowledge than we currently possess, and prepare for this by deepening our commitment to finding answers to these questions through investing in research for children and young people.

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